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## THE WRITING OF ENGLISH

It would be, if taken literally, alarming news that the French are losing the ability to write their own language with skill. For if the art of writing is decaying in France, where style and taste are native, what hope is there for the rest of the world? Possibly the case is not so bad as it seems to the distinguished French critic, Emile Faguet, who, in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, gives a deplorable account of the younger generation. The young cubs are not apt to seem promising to the old lions, and M. Faguet has been a literary lion for more than a quarter of a century. It may be that some of the least hopeful and most unlicked of the lot will be roaring loudest when the new century has got its growth; the youthful Balzac, for example, would have been of scant comfort to a pessimistic academician of the early 19th century. But taking M. Faguet's word for it, we need not suppose that France is in any immediate danger of becoming as slovenly as America or England in the use of the native tongue. For that, the process of degeneration would have to go on for a long time, and the neat conversational habits of the French people must be a potent correction to negligence in prose. Very likely the symptoms of which the critic complains are still so slight that they might escape the notice of a less sensitive observer, and it is to be hoped that once detected they will be effectively met. The world has need of France as a salutary model of style.

But the point of special interest to educators in this country is that this acute critic does not look for a remedy to more exigent and prolonged drill in writing. Such drill has been the ordinary American remedy, and on the face it seems plausible. Do our boys and girls write badly? Then make them practice writing till they can do it well. It is the practical common-sense way of approaching the subject, and up to a certain degree it works. But the case is not quite so simple as it seems. Writing is not a detached single process like operating a typewriter or adding columns of figures. The stenographer gains nothing from having a nice touch for Chopin, or not enough to make him begin his studies with a

musical education. The accountant can add no faster for a mastery of sines, tangents, and logarithms, or not enough faster to pay for prolonged delving in higher mathematics. But writing prose is not merely manipulating a pen or arranging words in neat sentences and paragraphs. It is mainly the adequate expression in conventional forms of thoughts that have already taken shape in the mind, and the education that produces clear, vigorous thinkers will make good writers even though rhetorical training be neglected. Whereas training in writing, without the proper conditions for producing good thinkers, is pretty sure to be futile.

It can hardly be pretended by the most patriotic, for example, that the increased attention paid to English and to rhetoric in this country during the past quarter-century has enabled America to outstrip England in the art of writing. The English have, during the last few years, taken the example of America to heart, and an "English association" has lately been formed which has for its principal object the promotion of the study of the vernacular in schools and colleges. It is likely that within a few years English will be as much taught in England as in our schools and colleges. That improvement in writing will be the consequence is by no means certain; it depends very much upon the quality of the general education offered, and the intellectual spirit shown by the rising generation.

There was a time when good Americans felt hopeful that we were rapidly overhauling England. We had classics like Irving, Poe, and Hawthorne, for models of pure prose style, and it seemed only reasonable to suppose that American nervous energy applied to daily themes and the analyzing of Shakespearean plays would give an advantage over an easy-going, negligent country that troubles itself little about grammar or dictionary. And yet the standard of American writing has not been perceptibly bettered, and a candid observer must reluctantly concede that the standard of English work is still higher than our own. It would be easy to name a score or more of living English writers for whom we can offer no equivalent, and the average quality of the work in English papers, reviews and books is perceptibly better in style than our own. It would be absurd, of course, to take this as a demonstration that training in English and the art of writing is useless and should be given up. What it shows is simply that good writing depends upon many factors, and that technical practice, though an excellent thing, is not enough in itself.

Important as it is, and to be encouraged in every way, formal instruction in the art of writing must always be secondary to education for wide culture and vigorous thinking.



Good writing is mainly a matter of robust intellectual appetite and digestion employed upon matters that provoke self-expression. A "soft" course tells as fatally in prose style as in anything else; the elective system has perhaps done most harm to the dilettante temperament which might be expected to furnish most of the good writers, but which needs the rigorous discipline which it is prone to shirk, and under the new education does shirk. Some doctors are telling us that Americans eat too much sugar; at all events, the training table of an athletic writer ought not to be set with a surfeit of literary sweets. The doctrine that the student should do only what he finds interesting works most damage in the field of belles lettres, which can easily degenerate into lazy trifling with current fiction in English and foreign languages. The vitiated style of much of the professional writing of the day is probably to be traced in no small measure to bad literary diet. The writers of fifty years ago may have read less widely, but they were rather apt to be reared on such strong meat as the Bible, the literary masterpiece which has done most for English style. The copious fiction of today seems to be written by authors nourished mainly on light novels.

M. Faguet seems to be quite right in his diagnosis; good writing is mainly a question of intellectual fiber. Only practice, to be sure, can give the desirable polish, but a flabby mind can no more take on such a polish than a soft, characterless wood can take on the surface of mahogany. The novelist Gorky remarked some years ago that Maupassant had taught all the young Russian authors to write well. Superficially, perhaps, but what does it matter beside the rough vigor of the older Russian writers? A literature may go bankrupt when technical skill is at its highest, as has more than once been demonstrated in France. But more than this, even technical skill inevitably declines unless nourished from within. It may be suspected that the conditions of which M. Faguet complains are partly the result of the trend of literature in France for a generation past. It would be strange if a time of such highly accomplished triviality did not lead to a reaction. As for America, it is not easy to say what reaction may be looked for from our literary habits—certainly literary overpolish has not been our national temptation. If we have a vice it is the habit of easy reading, which is apt to make bad writing. Education can hardly render a greater service to the average American boy than to toughen his mind to grapple with hard books and to get pleasure from conquering them whether he likes them or not. If his intelligence can once be got actively at work striking out ideas and setting them in order, the problem of expression will almost take care of itself; if indolence and the gratification of the taste

of the moment prevail, no number of composition courses will help him to write well. The teachers of English in school and college are doing valuable work, but they are sorely handicapped by the general disposition to make things easy and agreeable for the student, and English itself has come to be so generally regarded as a "soft" subject that any stiffening of it is resented. And yet stiffening all along the line is exactly what is needed; if courses in English fail of the expected result, it is apt to be simply because the student is not leading or trying to lead the intellectual life.

—*The Springfield Republican.*

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We are reprinting this article from *The Springfield Republican* because we feel it worth while to keep in touch with opinions of those outside our own profession, especially when the opinion presented is one which squarely sets up for us a very definite warning.

Most of us who have been spending the years of the recent past in correcting themes are quite willing to admit that the labor at times seems all out of proportion to the results secured. In spite of frequent themes and frequent corrections and conferences, and rewritings, the composition work of our pupils is faulty and flabby. We need to ring again and again the tocsin—*clear thinking makes clear writing*. The sequel of the preachment should be emphasis upon that sort of teaching that makes thought virile, rather than that which makes form perfect.

We have set up false standards for our pupils. Last week a high school senior came to her teacher to complain of a B mark rendered on a theme that had no corrections upon it. "I don't understand this grade," she said, "there are no mistakes on the paper, but you did not give me an A." As if faultlessness was synonymous with strength!

A professor, who had just heard Phillips Brooks preach one of his inimitable sermons, was unrestrained in his praise. "That man," he added, "violated all the laws of rhetoric, but the effect was splendid."

It is to be hoped that at the fall meeting of our Association in Boston on Saturday, December 9th, where the whole subject of composition is to be treated from several points of view, that we may have many helpful suggestions along lines that will lead to clearer conceptions of the importance of the thought fabric. — *The Editor.*



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### ANNOUNCEMENT OF FALL MEETING.

The next meeting of the Association will be held in Boston on Saturday, December 9th. The theme to be discussed is *Composition—Oral and Written*. The speakers, who are from our own membership, have promised to be short and crisp. The thought of the Executive Committee in planning the program is to allow ample time for full and informal discussion. A complete program will later be mailed to the members.



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